



Montgomery County Council FY2024 CIP Testimony
Link Hoewing, Chair
Fair Access Committee for the Western County
February 7, 2024

I am Link Hoewing from the Fair Access Committee for the Western County. We were created by the citizens and supported by the Town of Poolesville to push for equity in the provision of county and state services and facilities for our area. Not only did the county fail to modernize our high school for decades even though it was the oldest in the county, it even tried to close the school from the 1950s up through the 1980s. We are many miles from a senior center, community center and needed health care services.

The last Council, including the incumbents here tonight, helped begin to redress the inequities in county policies concerning our area by approving funding to rebuild our high school. **Given the focus on equity I heard often from those just elected, we have faith this new Council will continue the progress that has been made.**

In reality what I am proposing today are *not new spending programs*. They are really *catch-up programs* to invest in services and programs that we should have already had like other county residents.

First, we would like to see funding for the promised community center, **if not in this fiscal year than in the next**. A POR for the center is already being developed and MCPS has reserved space in its plans for the high school to collocate the center.

Second, the CIP suggests that a number of schools will have funding to build Wellness Centers. Poolesville, despite our unique situation far removed from convenient access to supporting medical and mental health services, is not included. Given that the high school is being rebuilt, **it makes sense from an equity and fiscal standpoint to include it in the CIP for either this year or the next.**

Third, we have had to push MCPS for many months to finally agree to **include in the high school's plans for a main gym that is comparable to other high schools**. We are uncertain if there will be enough funding in the current allocation for the high school to fund this new gym but if not, it should be included this fiscal year so there are no delays in construction.

Fourth, we have a very large aging population, lots of young families, and a very competitive swim team. **A year-round pool could help older people who need rehabilitation, provide**

healthy recreation year-round for families, and give our swim team more opportunities to succeed.

Finally, once White's Ferry is operating again, money should be included in next year's fiscal budget to make improvements in the roadway and the operational systems for the Ferry that could increase its capacity and efficiency, so it can handle more traffic with greater safety as per the 2021 White's Ferry report funded by this Council.

Addendum - Policy Changes and Initiatives to Address Key Problems in the Western County

Fair Access Committee for the Western County, February, 2023

The Fair Access Committee, with the backing and support of the Town of Poolesville as well as the surrounding communities, has been promoting a number of policy and budget proposals that will help address some of the key inequities and challenges facing the Western County. Below is a summary of those proposals in rough order of priority.

Ensuring the Reconstruction of the High School Includes All Elements for Our Students' Future Success – While the Fair Access Committee and our community achieved great success in securing funding for the reconstruction of Poolesville High School, the process has not been without continuing hurdles and uncertainty. The original plans for the project only included a budget of about \$71 million, about the cost of building a new middle school. They also would have eliminated both the old all-purpose room and the “old” old (or auxiliary) gym which are necessary for indoor practice. After months of push back, we succeeded in increasing the budget to \$110 million and ensuring the auxiliary gym would be retained and refurbished. MCPS still refused to expand our main gym and ensure that it is comparable to other high school gyms even though we showed that it is by far the smallest in the county. We believe we have finally convinced MCPS to both expand the gym and include a complete weight room and full-size wrestling room, but we still have not seen final plans and do not know if funding will be needed to complete these proposed new plans.

While we believe MCPS is moving to include plans for a new, expanded main gym which will ensure our athletes and PE students have adequate indoor practice space in Poolesville High School, we have no such assurance with respect to outdoor playing fields and practice space. So far, MCPS has not agreed to renovate these outdoor fields even though such renovations are common when other high schools are built or renovated. We believe funding for such work should also be included in the FY2024 or 2025 CIP budgets.

We also proposed that a Wellness Center be included in the plans for reconstructing PHS. It makes sense to include the new center in the construction program as the new school is rebuilt rather than wait until after the project is completed to return and add the Center. The CIP seems to include no funding in the coming fiscal year for the Center but instead only allows for designing and planning for its completion. We believe the Center should be included in the construction program, so it will be ready for use when the school reopens in January of 2025. Ideally, that means it should be funded no later than the next fiscal year.

Building the Community Center – The County Executive did include funding in last year's budget to prepare a (Program of Requirements or POR) for a proposed community center for our area which was approved by the Council. The facilities planning department has been working diligently on the POR and it should be finished by this coming spring. Given the significant health care inequities in the Western County as described below, the community center should include clinic space to allow for the provision of medical services for the many in need in the

area. We ask that funding for the design and construction of the community center be included in the FY2024 budget.

Funding White's Ferry Reopening and Long-Term Improvements – It has been apparent for some time that the private parties involved in the operation of White's Ferry are unable to reach an agreement to reopen the Ferry. The Fair Access Committee has been supporting the Montgomery County Department of Transportation in an effort to negotiate an easement with the Virginia landowner who controls the Ferry's Virginia termination point. Public funding will be needed to support the agreement and we urge that funding for this project be included in the FY24 Operating Budget for \$300,000. As important as it is to reopen the Ferry as soon as possible, the 2021 Ferry Study found that significant improvements to the roadways leading to the Ferry and modernization of Ferry systems (such as payment processing) could enhance the Ferry's operations and allow it to handle up to 40 percent more traffic. These improvements would strengthen the Ferry's utility and viability and improve its contributions as a transportation link in the area. Some of these improvements would likely be in the hands of the Ferry operator but many of them are the responsibility of the government. We urge funding be included in the FY2024 CIP Budget to undertake traffic studies and design work to determine what improvements are needed in line with the 2021 report in preparation for funding actual work beginning in the FY2025 budget.

Improving Health Care Outcomes in the Western County – As noted, health care outcomes in the Western County are poor on many dimensions due to a combination of factors such as the lack of local medical services and personnel, the long distances involved in accessing needed medical services, the lack of public transportation services, and the lack of facilities. A significant factor contributing to this situation is the appalling lack of information and understanding on the part of the County Government regarding the health needs and health problems of local residents in the Western County. WUMCO is doing pioneering work in testing various medical services to determine what the needs are for many needy residents but much more work needs to be done with County assistance. Facilities that can be used creatively to offer health care services need to be incorporated into the plans for both the Community Center and the Wellness Center. The County itself can be more proactive in trying out new services that can serve the needs of those in remote areas such as mobile clinics and facilitated telehealth care offerings.

Another example of innovative healthcare programming is the work of Community FarmShare's Food Is Medicine approach to supporting those in need in our community. This program provides "produce prescriptions" to our residents who have been identified through WUMCO's health initiative (in partnership with community health clinics) as having (or being at risk of) diet related chronic disease. Through this partnership, patients gain access to healthcare as well as a means (healthy food access) to help them on the road to health improvements and diet related disease management. Community FarmShare is submitting a detailed proposal along these lines for county-wide programming. Resources should be identified in all of these areas and included in the FY2024 or FY2025 Operating Budget.

Improving Public Transportation in the Western County - Our local charitable services organization for the Western County, WUMCO Help, serves clients who have no means of visiting doctors or medical services conveniently and regularly. They operate a volunteer driving program to help clients get to doctors' appointments. Their data suggests that it is likely that a significant number of older citizens in the Ag Reserve live alone, are chronically ill, have mental health illnesses, and/or cannot drive either because they cannot afford a car, or their medical condition prohibits it. Many parts of the western county are nearly 15 miles from the nearest specialists or doctors in more populated areas like Germantown or Gaithersburg. Getting to these services for many in the western Montgomery County is very difficult for those who cannot drive or cannot afford a car. The county bus service only runs to Poolesville and it does not extend to other areas like Dickerson, Barnesville or Beallsville. The existing bus line runs along a route that takes it to Metro in Gaithersburg and does not stop in Germantown or Rockville, where many doctors have offices. WMATA, which provides "call to schedule" bus rides in many parts of the county that provides pick-ups and drop offs at the doors of clients does not do so in the western county. The service only operates where scheduled bus service exists and in the entire western county, the only place that is served by a public bus is Poolesville.

Finding tailored services that meet the needs of clients who live in far out, very rural areas where more traditional "scheduled" bus services likely will not be sustainable is an important part of improving the lives and health of many residents in the Western County. One way of helping address these problems is to have the Department of Transportation undertake a study of the public transportation needs of the Western County with a special focus on transportation for those who cannot drive, need to get to visits with doctors, or cannot easily get food delivered to their homes. Funding should be included in the FY2024 Operating Budget for this purpose.

Covered Year-Round Swimming Pool - We are very grateful that the county constructed (and recently updated) an outdoor swimming pool for our area some years ago. We have a very active and successful swim team and we also have a large and growing aging population. Both of these groups, along with families, would benefit tremendously if the pool could be covered so that it can be used year-round. As it is, this wonderful facility is only available about three months out of the year and it is such a waste to have it remain idle for much of the year. Some of the poor health care outcomes for the Western County which were found in the 2018 Zip Code study could be addressed if a year-round pool was available to allow for fitness and rehabilitation programs, especially for older residents. Funding should be included in the FY2024 or FY2025 CIP Budget for this project.

Understanding and Improving the Economy of the Western County - As noted, the Western County's economic, business and social structures simply do not fit the metrics often used in the rest of the much more populated, suburban/urban county. We are a rural "oasis" in the midst of large areas of population concentration down county where more "urban style" problems exist.

The Western County's economy is not based on large corporate investments and operations, large chain stores, and major government facilities as is the case in much of the densely populated down county areas. Instead, the "hub" of Poolesville is anchored to the collective operation and success of many local businesses, most of which are locally and/or family owned and small in size. Poolesville is also connected to the many businesses, farms, historic sites, and outdoor recreation facilities that dot the Western County. These "spokes" attract visitors of many kinds from many areas who are interested in everything from buying fresh, locally grown vegetables to visiting historic sites of many kinds to hiking, biking or watching wildlife. The Western County already has many elements for economic success, but it can truly become an even more robust center of growth and vitality for the entire county based on tourism, outdoor activities, agriculture, and outdoor entertainment and leisure.

However, from all we can determine, the County has very little solid information on the entire economic fabric that makes up the Western County, particularly how small businesses and tourism contribute to economic vibrancy and how to enhance it. Studies and research need to be done to substantially improve our understanding of how to enhance the economic vitality of the Western County. Work also needs to be done to significantly improve and expand work done to promote and attract visitors to the Western County. Finally, all of this work should be put to use by developing a robust strategy and policy framework that drive future improvements. These efforts will take resources but the payback both to economic growth and the lives of Western County residents can be substantial.

Funding should be included in the FY2024 Operating Budget to support an economic and business study of the Western County co-directed by Visit Montgomery and the Montgomery County Economic Development Council.

Helping Preserve Historic Assets in the Western County

One of the significant benefits of the Ag Reserve is that because it is based on policies that prohibit large developments or major building projects, many historic sites that might otherwise have been "bulldozed" are preserved or remain untouched. The Historic Medley District serves the Western County and has helped preserve and promote historic sites throughout the area. Its work has led to the preservation of the Old Seneca Schoolhouse on River Road and the "old bank building" in the middle of the "Historic West End" of Poolesville, among other examples.

A significant example of the history of Montgomery County stands just outside Poolesville in the Jerusalem community, an area settled by former slaves and freed blacks after the Civil War. Jerusalem is among a large number of historically black communities in the Western County including Sugarland, Martinsburg, Jonesville and Big Woods.

Along the outskirts of Jerusalem now sits a county roads facility used to store equipment, road salt, plowing equipment, and serve as a collection point for trash. Sitting on the site is a white, clapboard building used by the county for storage at the site. While it seems unremarkable, it is

in fact an old “Rosenwald School” with the same design as the many thousands of such schools built in the 1930’s and 40’s across this country. The Rosenwald school building program was a Progressive Era program funded by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, an executive with Sears. He partnered with African American educator and activist Booker T. Washington, first working with Washington's Tuskegee Institute and then forming an independent foundation to manage the school program.

Rosenwald schools were built to serve African American children in an era when most were prohibited from going to white public schools. The program required the local community to contribute half of the funds to build each school so in a very real sense, the Jerusalem community has a stake in the school building. It is not known but likely that the county did not compensate the community for the school when it acquired the property.

The school building on the county roads site remains intact but has had an addition tacked on one end. Members of Historic Medley and our community have been trying for years to convince the county to consider relinquishing the building to be used as a community site and museum. At the very least, the county should create and post a prominent sign along the road bordering the site alerting citizens to the school’s existence and significance.

Funding should be included in the FY2024 operating budget for a county agency review and assessment of the feasibility of returning the building back into its original form and converting it into a museum/community meeting space. The review should be conducted by the county with the input of the community, particularly members of the Jerusalem neighborhood and members of the Historic Medley District. Funding should also be included to install, before the end of calendar 2023, a sign commemorating the school building and explaining its significance.

Quick Overview of Key Fair Access Committee Policy Recommendations

Ensuring the Reconstruction of the High School Includes All Elements for Its Future Success

FY2024 CIP Budget – Funding to ensure completion of expanded gym including full size weight room and wrestling room (Amount To Be Determined).

FY2025 CIP Budget – Funding to ensure construction and completion of Wellness Center (Amount To Be Determined).

FY2024 or 2025 CIP Budget – Funding to renovate outdoor practice and playing fields (Amount To Be Determined)

Building the Community Center

FY2025 CIP Budget – Based on the Program of Requirements (POR) report that will be released by facilities planning in the county later in the spring, funding to build the new Western County Community Center should be included in the FY2025 CIP budget (Amount To Be Determined).

Funding White's Ferry Reopening and Long-Term Improvements

FY2024 CIP Budget – Funding for traffic studies and design work to Improve Ferry operations for the future (Amount To Be Determined).

FY2024 Operating Budget – \$300,000 to fund first year of easement agreement.

Improving Health Care Outcomes in the Western County

FY2025 CIP Budget – Funding to ensure a clinic space is included in the planned Community Center (Amount To Be Determined).

FY2024 Operating Budget – Funding to support offering of innovative service approaches to meet the needs of Western County residents relying on information and data supplied by WUMCO and to support “Food as Medicine” program (Amount To Be Determined).

Improving Public Transportation in the Western County

FY2024 Operating Budget – Special study by the Department of Transportation of the public transportation needs of the Western County with a special focus on transportation for those who cannot drive, need to get to visit doctors, or cannot easily get food delivered to their homes (Amount To Be Determined).

Covered Year-Round Swimming Pool

FY2025 CIP Budget – Funding to cover the existing Sarah B. Auer Outdoor Swimming Pool so it can be used year-round (Amount To Be Determined).

Understanding and Improving the Economy of the Western County

FY2024 Operating Budget – Joint study by the Montgomery County Economic Development Council and Visit Montgomery to develop solid information regarding the economic, social and business structures that make up the Western County (Amount To Be Determined).

Helping Preserve Historic Assets in the Western County – Rosenwald School in Jerusalem

FY2024 Operating Budget - County agency review and assessment of the feasibility of transferring the former school to the ownership of the Historic Medley District. Install before the end of calendar 2023 a sign commemorating the school building and explaining its significance (Amount To Be Determined).